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SUBJECT: EDUCATING ALI -- TEACHING SADDAM,S LOST GENERATION
TO READ

Classified By: Henry Wooster, A/OPA Director, for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)
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11. (U) This is a PRT Dhi Qar reporting cable.

12. (C) SUMMARY. Illiteracy plagues Dhi Qar. Thirty-seven percent of the residents of this Shi'a heartland province, and a higher percentage of women, can neither read nor write Arabic, according to Dhi Qar,s Director General (DG) of Education. Coalition programs do not focus on Arabic literacy per se. While Multi-National Forces*Iraq (MNF-I) school construction projects do address a root cause of truancy and illiteracy, Dhi Qar,s primary school children are dropping out at an increasing rate. Dhi Qar, which already suffers from the highest unemployment rate in the country, does not appear to offer economic opportunities that provide incentives for parents to make sure children stay in school. Aside from the oil sector, Dhi Qar is at risk of remaining a long-term economic backwater. END SUMMARY.

ILLITERACY IN IRAQ -- LIES, DAMN LIES, AND STATISTICS

13. (SBU) Statistics on Iraqi literacy are unreliable, but anecdotal evidence suggests the problem is worse than most of the numbers indicate. For example, a 2006 UNESCO estimate rates Iraq's overall literacy rate at 74.1 percent. However, this figure appears to be based in part on 2000 data and in part on estimates that are contradicted by other studies, including a September 2003 UNESCO report that places the overall Iraqi literacy rate at 40.4 percent. The 2003 report claims the female literacy rate in Iraq is a shocking 24.4 percent. Ironically, Iraq won a UNESCO prize for eradicating illiteracy in 1982.

THE SHIA SOUTH -- AN "AREA OF PARTICULAR CONCERN"

14. (C) Literacy statistics from Iraq's southern provinces, which suffered heavily during three decades of war and sanctions, are also elusive, but the available evidence is disturbing: a 2005 World Food Programme (WFP) survey, carried out in cooperation with Iraq's Central Organization for Statistics and Information, concluded that nearly 30 percent of Dhi Qar's adults are illiterate. (NOTE: The survey concluded illiteracy rates were even worse in the neighboring provinces of Maysan and Muthanna. END NOTE.) Dhi Qar's DG of Education's Department of Illiteracy and Adult Education, which tracks of literacy rates in the province, believes things have gotten worse since 2005. The DG currently estimates that 37 percent of the province's adult population is illiterate.

15. (C) The legacy of Saddam's reprisals targeted at the southern provinces after the Shi'a Ashura uprising of 1991 reverberate until today. While the education system didn't collapse, many students were not able to go to school regularly, and many of those who could, chose not to go, a disturbing trend that continues today. While there are no reliable literacy studies for Dhi Qar's young adults, several

UN reports have noted this group is even more likely to be illiterate than their parents, and anecdotal evidence supports that conclusion. Many PRT contacts estimate that Dhi Qar residents aged 20 to 30 have an illiteracy rate of at least 50 percent for men and higher for women. General Habib al-Husseini, commander of the Iraqi 10th Army Division, which is made up of soldiers from Basra, Nasiriyah and Amara, told PRTOff that half his men are illiterate. In February 2009, the UN Secretary General noted that the high illiteracy rate in southern Iraq was "an area of particular concern" in his annual report on Iraq to the Security Council.

NEW DROPOUTS -- THREE GENERATIONS OF DROP-OUTS ARE ENOUGH

¶17. (C) Dropping out of school is a growing trend in Dhi Qar. The 2005 WFP survey found an increasing dropout rate among students under 15. The Dhi Qar DG of Education told PRTOff that one of every five of the province's primary school students (and a disproportionate number of girls) do not attend school. Local NGO representatives say the percentage is higher, especially among girls. NGOs, educators, and parents at conferences held in Nasiriyah and Suq ash-Shyukh in August and November this year identified several root causes of the dropout problem:

- poverty, which forces children to work rather than attend school;
- security risks and tribal disputes;
- lack of adequate legislation to compel schooling and prohibit child labor;
- overcrowded and shabby school facilities;

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- incompetent teachers; and
- corporal punishment.

¶18. (C) The conference attendees also agreed parental attitudes toward education play a role in the dropout phenomenon. Many parents pull girls from school to work or marry. Others fail to see any benefits to an education because in Dhi Qar a degree does not equal a job. The latter concern is justified. PRTOff met with four recent graduates of Dhi Qar law school last week. None of these recent law graduates, described by their law professor as the best and the brightest, have jobs in their chosen field. When asked about their concerns for the future, the four would-be lawyers expressed the same two fears: continued unemployment and a victory by the Islamists. The leader of the Iraqi Communist Party in Dhi Qar expressed similar frustrations. The party, founded in Nasiriyah in 1934, draws many of its members from academia and the farm and factory unions. The leader told PRTOff the main problem now is the lack of jobs for young people. He then asked a rhetorical question: "Are jobs in the army and the police the kind of jobs we want our children to have?"

WHERE ARE THE LITERACY PROGRAMS?

¶18. (SBU) The DG of Education complains that the Iraqi central government does not have an effective literacy program. However, Dhi Qar has done little itself to fight illiteracy either. While Coalition reconstruction efforts in Iraq include many English language programs, they lack many programs aimed specifically at Arabic literacy initiatives. On August 2, 2009, six years after Operation Iraqi Freedom began, MNF-I hosted what it billed as the "first ever" combined agency-NGO literacy conference in Baghdad. All those attending the "NGOs Raising the Banner of Literacy" conference were from Baghdad. Nor does help appear to be on the way for the provinces any time soon-- Mercy Corps has plans to roll out a USG-funded literacy program in Dhi Qar, but the program is delayed.

¶9. (C) The Coalition has certainly contributed to the development of education as a whole in Dhi Qar. Over the years, MNF-I has built many new schools in Dhi Qar province and refurbished many others. These projects address one important root cause of truancy: shabby and overcrowded schools. Nonetheless, challenges remain. Dhi Qar's DG of Education recently told Dhi Qar's PRTOff that only 20 percent of the province's 1,477 public schools (including its 170 mud schools, the highest number in Iraq) are in "proper" shape. The DG and his planning director virtually begged the PRT to build a new primary school in ash-Shatrah's Bene Zeit area. The squalid school, which the DG is "ashamed of", is a good example of the larger problem facing the province and is literally falling apart.

PRT LITERACY INITIATIVES - EDUCATING ALI AT CAMP MITTICA

¶10. (SBU) Earlier this year, the Iraqi Army started administering literacy tests to its soldiers. Many of the soldiers in General Habib's 10th Division failed the test. Habib says that he was told failure means discharge. In July 2009, Habib asked PRT Dhi Qar's Team Leader to teach his illiterate soldiers to read and write Arabic. Two Iraqi-American PRT staff members volunteered to teach a total of 40 10th Division soldiers to read and write in Arabic at the PRT's Mittica training facilities. The soldier-students, all Shi'a from Nasiriyah, Basra, and Amara, were 18 to 30-years old. Most were single, from very large families (with five to 15 siblings) and were, on soldier's salaries of Q(with five to 15 siblings) and were, on soldier's salaries of about \$400 a month, the primary breadwinners for their extended families. All were enthusiastic to be learning to read.

¶11. (C) The PRT literacy effort, designed to prevent twenty)something soldiers from joining the swelling ranks of Dhi Qar's unemployed, was done on a shoestring. The "advanced class" teacher used photocopied newspaper articles. His students made rapid progress and most will be able to pass the IA test with relative ease. The "beginner class" teacher used photocopies of three dog-eared adult literacy books provided by the DG of Education. He had a tougher task, but the dedicated students made progress.

¶12. (C) By September, the Iraqi Army literacy classes at Mittica had grown to over 60 students. Then, on September 8, only two of the 60 students showed up for class. Basim, one of the hardest working students, reported his Brigade was moving to Amara, and everyone else was packing up to go. But he packed early so he would not miss class. His teacher didn't bat an eye. He taught Basim and the one other student

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who showed up for an hour and a half. PRT Dhi Qar is now working with PRT Maysan to continue the program at Camp Gary Owen.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The PRT program to teach young men at risk of being kicked out of the army is aimed at a critical group that could potentially feed insurgent or militia groups. However, the PRT's teaching efforts cannot address the larger problem of illiteracy. The comments above show that Iraqis blame educational institutions and facilities for poor education, but many poorer countries with worse facilities do better at educating pupils. Experience in other developing countries shows that if parents perceive that the economy offers opportunities to the educated, they will be more likely to ensure their children stay in school. Reforming and repairing Dhi Qar's non-oil economy will probably be the cause as well as the result of better literacy.
HILL